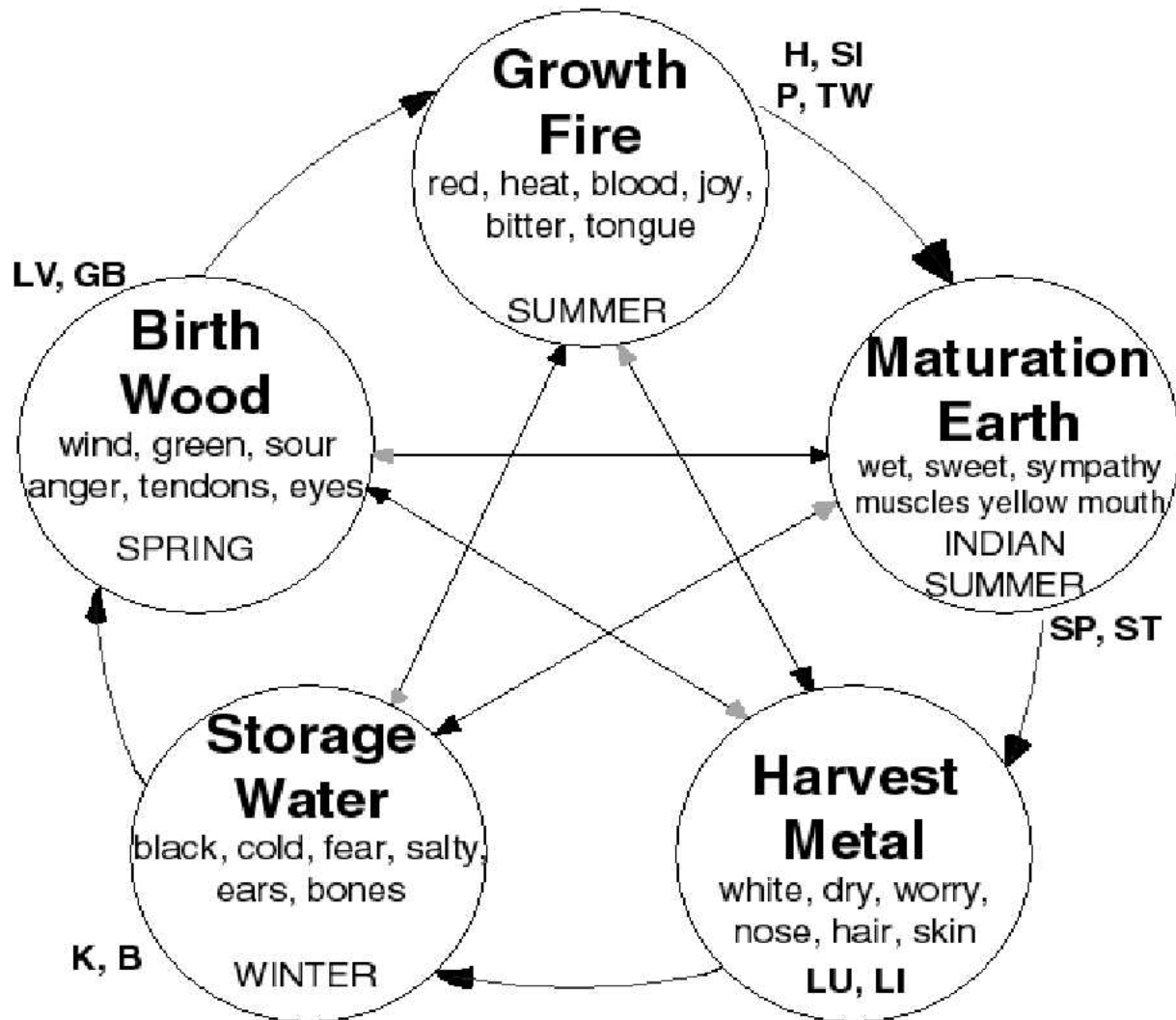


## 5 Phase/5 Element Theory

5 phase theory is named after the 5 phases of seasonal plant growth in early agriculture. Each phase has been associated with materials: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. Since these are similar to 4 Greek Elements (earth, fire, water, air) 5 phase theory has become more commonly called 5 element theory. This has the unfortunate connotation that the 5 phases are static and somehow “pure,” neither created nor destroyed but possibly a constituent of all other things. We will see that this is very wrong. Remember, in Chinese medicine and philosophy everything is constantly changing, everything is dynamic, everything is always in motion. The Chinese love cycles. Western philosophy loves linear logic, making it difficult for many western schooled people to understand Chinese medicine because they take the wrong approach.

This one diagram contains everything you need to know for an elementary understanding of 5 phase theory. Each phase has an associated color, temperature quality, emotion, taste, body part, and Yin-Yang pairs of organ channels.



## **The 5 Phases**

The 5 phases come from observing the cycle that plants go through every year, especially agricultural crop plants.

- Birth: We start the 5 phase cycle at the Birth phase, which is the time of creation. It is associated with the morning and the budding and sprouting of the spring.
- Growth: The next phase is a period of significant growth, as usually occurs in the summer. The Growth phase is also associated with noontime.
- Maturation: The Maturation phase is also known as the Transformation phase; plants reach their full heights and growths for the year and become mature plants. This happens during the long days of the Indian Summer that are at the end of summer and the beginning of fall. This phase is correlated with the afternoon on the daily time scale.
- Harvest: During the fall, plants reach their full storage capacity. Grains like wheat and rice go from green to straw-colored; leaves turn yellow, orange, red, and brown. This is the time to gather and harvest crops. Evening is the time of day associated with the Harvest phase.
- Storage: Collected grain is stored and slowly consumed during the winter. It is a time of rest and dormancy, just as the night is.

## **The 5 Associated Materials and the Birth Cycle**

Each phase is associated with a material, more commonly known as the 5 “elements”: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. Basic 5 phase theory utilizes 3 cycles. The first is the Birth Cycle and is shown in the diagram by the curved arrows that connect the 5 phases in a circle. Birth qi gives rise to Growth qi gives rise to Maturation qi gives rise to Harvest qi gives rise to Storage qi which cycles and gives rise to Birth qi.

When thinking about 5 phase theory as the materials, it makes more sense to think of this cycle as the Parent cycle and to begin with Water. Water is the parent of Wood; it gives birth to Wood since wood can only be grown with adequate water. Wood is the parent of Fire. Fire arises from the fuel that Wood provides. Fire gives birth to Earth qi. Down in the core of our planet, the heat and fires create the rocks that make up the Earth. In the depths of the Earth, metals are made. So Earth is the parent of Metal. From here, we must take a leap of faith in the Parent cycle and say that Metal gives rise to Water. There is no discrepancy in logic if we think of this cycle as the Birth Cycle of the 5 phases.

The Birth cycle is mainly used when we have deficiencies. Since each phase is birthed by its parent, if we are deficient in one phase, we may go to its parent and ask it to create more. For example, if I am deficient in Fire qi, I could work with the Wood qi to create more Fire.

## **The Control Cycle**

The Control Cycle is also known as the Grandparent Cycle. The star in the center with black arrowheads represents this cycle on the diagram, moving in the same direction as the Birth Cycle. As you can see, this cycle is simply the birth cycle except we skip a phase with each arrow. Instead of a phase pointing to its “child,” it points to its “grandchild.” Hence, the name Grandparent Cycle.

This cycle is also called the Control Cycle because we say each phase controls its grandchild phase. If a particular phase is excessive we have two options: we can drain the excess into the child (utilize the Birth Cycle), or we can boost the grandparent in order to exert control over that phase (utilize the Control Cycle). Since draining into the child phase means the birth of more of the child qi, this strategy is good when the child is deficient or if we don't drain too much into the child. It may not be favorable if the child is also in excess or too active. In this case, it is generally more favorable to use the Control cycle to calm the excessive phase.

If a particular phase is deficient, the control cycle can be used to help curb the drainage of qi from that phase. The Birth cycle is needed to replenish it.

## **The Insult Cycle**

The Birth and Control cycles are used for the assessment and treatment of imbalance within the 5 phases. In contrast, the Insult Cycle describes pathology – it explains what can go wrong in cases of extreme excess or deficiency in a phase. The Insult cycle is shown on the diagram as exactly the same as the Control Cycle, except moving in the opposite direction (grey arrowheads).

If a phase becomes extremely excessive, it can “insult” its grandparent and control the phase that it is normally controlled by. This can also happen if a phase becomes extremely deficient: it could become controlled by its grandchild phase. So if Fire is extremely deficient, it is at risk of being controlled by Metal. Instead of being controlled by Water as usual, it will now become *dominated* by it.